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ABSTRACT

In the face of an audience and public which wants the facts, the student writer has become increasingly fact-oriented and characters are mouthpieces for sides of an argument. These experiments may be useful, but we need to reserve the name "story" for a fictional work with characters who move through a set of actions. There are many unconventional topics and characters to challenge the contemporary writer of fiction. If you look to the story, the issues will follow. (AA)

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# What's Really Basic about Teaching Fiction Writing?

## Issues vs. Character in Action

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As non-fiction works its way into a stronghold in the reading public, writers of fiction seem paradoxically to be slipping more and more into the realm of fact. Thus, we have best-sellers of historical fantasy where once-live figures, now resurrected, mingle with invented characters in a fictional domain. They actually speak and cause things to happen, which, in the case of some political figures, might be an elevation. Outside the literary arena, there have been numerous dramatizations, in various visual media, of the lives of noted personages: Harry Truman, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Clarence Darrow, Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh; and events: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Pueblo, Watergate. The list goes—is going—on. And now, just days after a Washington, D. C., police group set up a phony cover as a fencing ring and nabbed hundreds of thieves and millions in loot, negotiations are already underway for a movie on the subject. (It just happened!) It seems that history is instantaneous and that fictional dramatization in some form is only a few steps behind.

In 1971 (what seems already like another age), an editor wrote politely to me that he perceived an unwillingness in the American public to enter into the imaginative world of a fiction writer, that what the public wanted was "the facts." Now, only five years after that bit of ominous perception, I might go a step further and say that what the aspiring writer—the writer whose manuscript and published story I have come to know more than any other—what the writer wants is to give the facts. The student of writing, trying to learn a craft in a classroom or a program of some kind (and searching desperately for an art),—the student I have encountered more than any other—

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is fact-oriented. Either this, or he turns to the other extreme, more often than not, to the realm of science fiction, where perhaps he finds a world fresh--because totally unknown--a world challenging because it is capable of being imagined, because it is not already known and "covered."

Overwhelmed by events and their instant replays, the typical student of fiction writing, as I see him or her, seeks out something from a past that was more real and writes a very short, staccato piece of prose--peppered with earnest, sincere, sometimes successful attempts to dramatize that event--prose that is thin camouflage for a television or cinematic scene. The paragraphs are choppy. The sentences are fragmented. (So is life, the rejoinder goes.) The characters (if there are characters) are mouthpieces for The Lesson.

Which brings us to the parable. In Martha Foley's Best American Short Stories 1973, the alphabet plays prophet and Barthelme's "A City of Churches" is lead story. There are two characters, and they have names. They speak. They act, a little. But the main character of the "story," of course, is the city of churches itself--the world, the universe, the cosmos. We are no more interested in Cecelia or Mr. Phillips, the two characters in dialogue who give us a tour of what this imagined world of the story is, than we are in, say, the church buildings themselves that line the streets wall-to-wall. For this is a story of idea. The thought's the thing. Puzzle it out. Agree or disagree. Who cares if Cecelia's car-rental concern makes a go of it?

It seems that we have come--or perhaps are coming--around to the obverse of what we as writers had a hard time learning. Remember? "Fiction is specific, dramatic, scenic. Show, don't tell!" There is now a good deal of telling going on as the fiction writer--swamped by rejections to the point of not bothering to send out much anymore, wary of an audience, confused by

pluralism on all fronts--turns away from his stock-in-trade, the character in action, and, looking for the action, heads on, head-on into the issues.

This may very well be the direction for us. Perhaps we need to clear our heads until people become distinct again and not mere labels of this or that persuasion. Last fall, in my creative writing class, we were discussing one of the students' stories about a young woman, newly moved into a neighborhood, who was trying to get to know an older woman who was not so inclined as she dominated in her meticulously clean house. The older woman was rather deftly portayed, the story having been written with her as the point-of-view character. Yet, one of the immediate reactions to the older woman was, "We all know her. She's one of those kind!" What had happened was that the story was read, connections were made to a stereotype, and the characterization, complete with some insight into the woman's mind, was forgotten. It reminded me of a student's science fiction story of the previous year, again in a classroom discussion, where the writer of the story, no longer constrained to remain silent about his authorship, blurted out, "Well, he's a Beta! If you were into science fiction, you would know what Betas are!"

Getting "into" things implies, as well as a simple entrance, an imminent exit. I know of no engaging literary character where such an in-and-out, for writer or for serious reader, is possible. But, let's face it, most students of fiction writing are not going to be writing for a lifetime, and hardly any for a living. This does not mean that they shouldn't be there. I want them there. I want the auditors there, and the ones who just came in to find out something about the process, and the ones who have been praised so much for their work that they suspect their flatterers of shallowness, and the ones who need someplace to go, and the ones who wonder what all the fuss is about.

And they should be mixed in with those who think they know, beyond any doubt, that they want to write and are there to learn, even to give. I do not believe that a single piano lesson has been wasted. Even the most unwilling of the lot will never forget where middle C is. And most will be better listeners of music.

That is as much our job in teaching fiction writing as the writing itself: to make appreciators, readers. To create an audience, so to speak, and in the process to have pass through, along with the rest, those few who will write the literature of their own age.

So what I would say "they" need from us--to use one of the basic thematic ~~questions~~ concerns of this conference--is a reassessment and a reassertion that fiction writing is unequivocal: the people,who must, first of all, be in the story to allow it to be called one, must count; life--or, at least, living--is at stake.

This is not to say that the parable, the anecdote, the character sketch, the prose poem, and those by any other name cannot be bona fide works of seriousness, imagination, and depth (or levity). I would simply reserve the name story to a fictional work with characters who move through a set of actions. I would make distinctions, take a stand. Robert Penn Warren has said in an essay, "Why Do We Read Fiction?," that it is "always our interest in a story" and that "the experience that is characteristically presented in a story is that of facing a problem, a conflict." This, of course, is so basic as to be old-hat. But we are in the middle of a literary laboratory. When the so-called experiments are successful, there is nothing more thrilling: Tillie Olsen's brilliant fifteen-year-old story "Tell Me a Riddle" or William Gass's "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" or William Eastlake's more recent "The Death of Sun."

But there can be nothing more dismal than a failed experiment. To try

to extend my little metaphor (perhaps ultimately a failed experiment itself)--a laboratory experimenter has traditionally known when he has failed: the lab blew up, the rabbit died (to mix metaphors), or the beaker melted. In any event, the results were not printed in the scientific journals (I don't believe) as a new thesis. But the results can be useful. We know what ground not to tread.

It is possible that, in the scramble to come up with new forms, too many failed experiments get published as stories, while those tagged on the toe with a rejection slip atrophy to stone. To fail as teachers of fiction writing to make distinctions, to take a stand, I believe to be a disservice to the student. He or she, after all, has not been over all this ground before. He can hardly start at the end. There is undoubtedly plenty of what we might call "unconventional" subject matter, and characters, to challenge the contemporary writer of fiction. Let him master some form--any form--to be able to tell his story as a story. Give her room. Stretch his canvas and make her use brush strokes not so arbitrary. Inspire him to set aside his power tools for a while and take up the slower hand auger and rasp. Make her apprentice herself, gather in someone's shadow the flowers that remain, and leave behind the vines for other fruit.

Look to the story. The issues, if they can, will follow.

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